



[Pierre-Joseph Proudhon](#) and his daughters, by Gustave Courbet, 1865

The Poverty of Philosophy

In Chapter 2 of his 1917 between-revolutions work “[The State and Revolution](#)”, V I Lenin wrote that “*The first works of mature Marxism — [The Poverty of Philosophy](#) and the [Communist Manifesto](#) — appeared just on the eve of the revolution of 1848.*” Among other things, “The State and Revolution” was Lenin’s own well-designed course on The Classics, moving through the works of Marx and Engels and revealing the spine or theme of the entire body of work.

We have elsewhere looked at this question and concluded that [The German Ideology](#), including the [Theses on Feuerbach](#), all written between 1845 and 1847 but not published in full until

1932, long after Lenin's death in 1924, ought to be recognised as one of the "first works of mature Marxism".

With all these, we have a reasonably clear-cut beginning to the "canon" of Marxism, in terms of time and of specific works. But what is the nature of this beginning, as revealed in these works?

One part of the answer to this question is polemic, which is a kind of argument that proceeds from criticism of an opponent's ideas expressed in text, carefully examined and dissected. These works of Marx's and Engels' are polemical. The German Ideology was a polemic against [Bruno Bauer](#) and against [Max Stirner](#), an anarchist who had previously published a book called "The Ego and Its Own". Another anarchist opponent of Marx and Engels in the early 1840s was [Wilhelm Weitling](#). The Poverty of Philosophy, started in January 1847 and published the same year, was a polemic against a third anarchist, [Pierre-Joseph Proudhon](#), who had written a book called "[The Philosophy of Poverty](#)".

In case we should get too particular about the term "anarchism", it can help to recall what Lenin wrote in Chapter 3 of The State and Revolution, namely that "*anarcho-syndicalism... is merely the twin brother of opportunism.*" The imprecision of anarchism is one of its faults. Its distinction from bourgeois and petty-bourgeois liberalism is not clear, because it is actually non-existent. Marx's polemic in "The Poverty of Philosophy" is directed against these faults, and others.

It is as well to use this opportunity to remind ourselves that there was no innocent Garden of Eden for Marxism before it was assailed by anarchists, “ultra-lefts”, revisionists, reformists and all sorts of deviationists, *escamoteurs* and demagogues. In fact, there was not even as much as one minute of peace for Marxism before it had to contend with all of these kinds of opponents. On the contrary, Marxism was actually conceived in this very same argument. The argument with the anarchists was itself the creative act. There was no Marxism prior to its polemical fights with anarchism, and it is fated to contend with these same foes in their many variations until the day that class struggle finally ends and the communist parties disband themselves.

The selected text from *The Poverty of Philosophy*, attached, and downloadable via the link given below, is a compilation of Part 3 of Chapter 2, together with the last pages of the book, which last pages comprise what is arguably the first concise full statement of Marxism.

It is not necessary for our present purposes to follow every twist and turn of Marx’s argument in Part 3 of *The Poverty of Philosophy*. Most of it is in any case lucid and clear, although it is sometimes not easy to tell which is Marx’s own voice, and which is Marx speaking satirically in Proudhon’s voice.

Some highlights include the following passage, where Marx anticipates both *Capital* Volume 3 and also the current banking crisis and US home-loan bubble:

“Competition is not industrial emulation, it is commercial emulation. In our time industrial emulation exists only in view of commerce. There are even phases in the economic life of modern nations when everybody is seized with a sort of craze for making profit without producing. This speculation craze, which recurs periodically, lays bare the true character of competition, which seeks to escape the need for industrial emulation.”

In the final part, Marx begins by advocating “combination”, which is the creation of mass democratic organisations, especially trade unions. He finds what Lenin calls the “twin brothers” - the reformist bourgeois economists and the utopian socialists - both arguing against combination (unions); yet he notes that the more advanced the countries become, the greater is the degree of combination. This kind of association then takes on a political character, says Marx.

In the final page Marx writes:

“An oppressed class is the vital condition for every society founded on the antagonism of classes. The emancipation of the oppressed class thus implies necessarily the creation of a new society... The condition for the emancipation of the working class is the abolition of every class... ...there will be no more political power properly so-called, since political power is precisely the official expression of antagonism in civil society... ...the antagonism between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie

is a struggle of class against class, a struggle which carried to its highest expression is a total revolution.”

This is classic Marxism.

The image above is a reproduction of a painting of Proudhon made in 1865 by the great Realist painter [Gustave Courbet](#) who in 1871 was placed in charge of all art museums by the [Paris Commune](#), and who was as a result subsequently exiled to Switzerland, where he died.

- The above is to introduce the original reading-text: [The Poverty of Philosophy, Karl Marx, 1847, excerpts](#).
- To download any of the CU courses in PDF files [please click here](#).